



BROKEN ROAD  
ROMANCE



# BROKEN ARROW

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# **Brokken Arrow**

A Novella

Brokken Road Romances

Book 3

Abigail Eldan

# Table of Contents

Title Page

Brokken Arrow (Brokken Road Romance)

Dedication

March 1867 | Easton, Missouri | Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Epilogue

About the Author

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Any discrepancies in the timeline between *Brokken Arrow* and the other novels in *The Brokken Road* series are entirely my doing. Working with several other authors and attempting to keep an unbroken timeline for when characters arrived in our fictional little town in Texas proved to be a challenge. In a few places, that timeline needed to be twisted a bit.

There are also minor characters in this series who appear in several of the stories. As with the timeline, there may be discrepancies in how those minor characters are portrayed from book to book.

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# Dedication

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*Brokken Arrow* is dedicated to my fellow Brokken Writers.  
Thank you for all your hard work!



March 1867

Easton, Missouri

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Chance Hale penned up the cow, scooped the bawling calf in his arms, and headed for the fenced area behind the barn. The momma's cries joined with her calf's, and their mournful din echoed those from the war.

He longed to press his hands against his ears, to drown out the sound, or release the calf and let it take its chances. Instead, he gritted his teeth and kept moving forward. His arms shook by the time he reached his destination, not solely from exertion.

With no time to waste, he worked feverishly to design a makeshift bandage from some old rags hanging at the front of the small barn. If he had checked to see Danny had done the job, he wouldn't be taking care of a lamed-up calf. It had stepped in a gopher hole, one he had told his nephew, Danny, to fill. It was his fault. Something, Chance wasn't sure what, had sunk its teeth into the lame calf, leaving a deep gash. He cursed his nephew.

Since he'd returned to Missouri, he'd worked feverishly to get the farm back up and running. This was the first calf of the year, coming early, before all the snow melted away. Each calf was precious, a way for his family to re-establish themselves. Little was left after the raiders, mostly deserters from the Confederacy, had taken what they wanted. Nine brothers had gone to War. Only two had returned, himself and his oldest brother, Daniel, his elder by fourteen years. Daniel, his wife, and their five children lived in the big house, out of sight of his small cabin.

And that's the way he liked it—alone with peace and quiet. Too bad Daniel forced Danny to work with him, if work was the right word.

Danny, his brother's namesake, had been born several years before the War. It'd been a shock to see the husky fifteen-year-old when Chance had returned home. When his nephew turned sixteen, he was already courting Miss Susie Elmore. They'd married last month, and Susie had moved into the family home with Daniel and his brood.

Chance finished his ministrations and carried the calf back to his mother whose smooth tongue reached for her calf before he'd entered the pen. The momma smelled of earth and hay, and this steadied him, eased the shaking of his limbs.

After Danny's irresponsibility, he could not trust him to keep a close eye on the calf, to watch for infection. It would be one more thing to add to his list of chores.

Chance snorted in anger. Newly married, Danny had little time to help. Heck, since Chance had returned, he'd observed his nephew doing precious little besides courting and wooing Susie.

Chance frowned. To be fair, it wasn't only the soldiers who'd had to endure hardships but also their families left behind, with so little to keep body and soul together. Who could blame Danny for wanting a wife and family? He shook his head. Courting and wooing were all well and fine, but that didn't keep you fed.

Chance was short on patience with his nephew. The farm hovered on ruin. His brother Daniel with a leg amputated right above the knee, was content to sit on the porch and rock his life away. A missing limb need not have kept him confined at home, but Chance suspected basking in his wife and daughters' care for him, wallowing in it, kept him from realizing the full extent of the farm's precarious position.

The burden of rebuilding the farm, of getting the family back on their feet, fell to Chance, and he accepted the responsibility, needed it, as a matter of fact.

He walked to the pump to wash the blood from his hands. Blood stained his clothes, and even the fresh scent of water could not displace the odor swirling around him, clinging to him. The morning mist lifted and revealed the vista. The trees were bare although small green buds were discernible. The trees gave him a sense of safety and secluded him from the stares of his neighbors.

A creek ran not forty feet from where he stood, and the gurgling sounds almost made him forget the din of war. Over almost two years now, the War's effects still rippled forth and tainted everything.

Before he had made it home from the War, his parents had been killed by raiders. Being the youngest, he had been left out of his parent's will. He wanted to believe it was because his assignment had been particularly dangerous, and they hadn't expected him to come back from the War. But more likely, they had disinherited him. He didn't know; they'd never spoken of it.

Heat rose from his neck into his face, and he gritted his teeth. He'd make amends. With work and perseverance, he'd get the farm up and running.

The ministrations to the calf had thrown him behind, and he worked quickly to finish his chores. He took a moment to judge the position of the sun and reckoned he had enough time to grab another cup of coffee.

His home was small, only two rooms, although it suited him fine. He took his coffee to the table, planning to sit for only a moment.

Outside, his dog Rascal barked, quieted, and then a knock sounded at the door. It swung open, and he was surprised to see Daniel and Danny. Daniel had never entered the cabin since they'd returned from

the War, but today, something had gotten him up and moving. Chance's gut told him it did not bode well.

"Morning," his brother said, his gaze darting around the cabin.

Chance grunted in reply but didn't move from his chair. His brother's gaze landed on him.

Chance cleared his throat and motioned to the pot on the stove. "Would y'all like some coffee?"

Both shook their head. The tips of Danny's ears were red and his eyes downcast. After a moment, Daniel paced around the room with his cane beating a rhythm. His movements reinforced Chance's belief that his brother could have, should have, been doing more around the farm.

When Daniel had circled the room a couple of times, he nodded, as if satisfied, and turned to face his brother. "I'm just going to come out with it. Danny and Susie need your cabin."

The words slammed into him like a gut punch. Emotions swirled, pushing his anger to the surface. He gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles whitened.

His brother took a seat and leaned his cane against its edge. "I reckon I could do with that coffee now."

Chance glared into his brother's face before pushing back his chair with unnecessary force. He poured the coffee and slid the cup to him, sloshing some out in the process.

Danny remained rooted to the same spot, his ears becoming a brighter shade of red when Chance directed his gaze in his direction.

Chance refreshed his own cup and blew across the top of the coffee. He watched the ripples as he forced the muscles in his face back to impassivity. Perhaps he was overreacting.

His brother leaned toward him. "Truth be told, little Susie is already expecting. We need to get them two settled before that young'un gets here."

A pain, as sharp as any knife, pierced his heart. He didn't take time to examine why but simply nodded. He decided to test the waters. "It won't take long to build me a house. I don't need much more than a lean-to."

Daniel shook his head, and Chance's gaze slid away, to a spot on the wall. He held himself in, waiting for the next blow.

Daniel coughed. "Nope. Won't do. Won't do at all for you to stay on this land. We got less than five hundred acres here, and I got more young'uns who be needing land."

Chance's breath released in a swoosh. He flattened his hands against the surface of the rough wood, as if he planned to propel himself across its surface. His voice remained level. "What are you saying?"

“You need to get out on your own. You ain’t more than twenty and six ...”

“Not yet twenty-four.” He held himself still and kept his breathing steady.

“Danny boy over there is fixin’ to have him a young’un. Done beat you to it, but heck, there’s plenty of women who might have you.”

Danny made a sound, halfway between a snicker and a cough. Chance let his gaze light on him for the briefest of moments and straightened. His eyes narrowed.

He took another sip of coffee that had somehow grown cold. He drank it anyway and set his cup down. “How am I supposed to make a living? Farming is all I know.”

His brother ran the back of one thumb across his lip and smiled. “You made a name for yourself in the War. Someone’s sure to help you out—heck, you could still use *your skills*.” His grin held something. As far as Chance could figure it was maliciousness.

A realization washed over him. His brother was jealous because he’d come through the War unscathed and had renown, unwanted as it was. His brother’s treatment of him was not solely a result of what Chance had done to his family.

He pushed back his chair with such force it toppled backwards. “I have chores to do.” Stiffly, without giving his brother a glance, he headed out.

His nephew stepped in his path. “We want you gone as soon as you can get out. Understand?” Danny had found his voice now that his father had done his dirty work.

Chance didn’t answer but pushed past. He jumped from the porch instead of using the steps. Rascal met him, and he patted the dog’s sides and allowed some of his anger drain away.

He headed to the barn to check the calf. A shock ran through him when it came into sight. It was stretched on its side with its tongue lolling out. His bandaging had done little good. The poor calf had bled out. The cow raised her head and let out a mournful moo.

Chance rested his forehead against a rough plank of the barn and closed his eyes for a second. He straightened his shoulders. He still had work to do.



DEBORAH BROKKEN AND Sheriff Victoria changed trains in Missouri. This train was smaller and reeked of sweaty bodies. Its black, belching seemed filled with hot anger and produced smells that made Deborah’s head ache. With each exhale of dark smoke, the trains pulsing matched the pounding in her head. She peered through the window, and for the briefest of seconds, she allowed her forehead to

touch the cool pane, to ease the throbbing.

It was no surprise her head ached. For the past few weeks, she'd endured continual stress. Each day, she feared the sheriff would find her brothers. Equally, she feared they would not. Either outcome held heartache.

The yearning for her family had forced her to come with the sheriff, even if it led to her brothers' imprisonment. She'd had high hopes of finding them among their German Pennsylvanian kin, and a scheme to escape with them had nebulously formed, but no one, it seemed, knew her brothers' names, much less their faces.

The trip had not been a complete waste. Her kinfolk had surprised her. So many still clung to the German way of life, and it comforted her to learn of it. Her father had been different than these relatives, probably because he'd been a cattleman in Texas, but even he had not completely abandoned his heritage.

Their ranch house, built of dark wood, had ornate carved railings and trim around the roofline. Neighbors had told him to paint his house white, to reflect away the hot rays from the Texas sun, but he'd refused. And somehow, the house was as cool inside as any Deborah had ever visited. The windows, situated according to his specifications, caught the slightest breeze.

She gave herself a shake to rid herself of her yearning. Her homesickness was not for the people ... not even for her grandparents, whom she often wished would go back to Boston. Her mother's parents were Jacksons, not Brokkens, and they did not possess the Brokkens' love for the ranch, the very place Deborah longed for. She was particularly homesick for the cabin, the Shooting House, her brothers had named it. She often rode her horse along the tree-lined stream that fed the lake. The path along the stream led to the cabin that held so many happy memories.

They were on the last leg of their trip, and she could endure, even if she had no place to rest her weary head. She longed to lean against Sheriff Vic and sleep. That wouldn't do. Victoria was not the motherly sort and would be aghast at the suggestion. The sheriff was good to her, in her own way, and Deborah regretted that the journey had been a waste of time, money, and energy for her.

A man's voice broke into her thoughts. "Ladies, if I'm not mistaken, this is my seat?"

His statement was a question, and Deborah and Victoria both gave him a nod of acquiescence. He had a ticket in his hand and held it out to them, as if to prove his claim. He stowed his case away, removed his hat, and took a seat across from them.

"How do you do? I'm Klint Caper." He nodded at the sheriff and tilted his head toward Deborah.

She looked into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. She opened her mouth to speak but not a word emerged. She averted her gaze to regain her composure.



To Deborah's relief, Sheriff Vic was more composed. "We are well and you?"

The man smiled, and those sky-blue eyes twinkled. "I am very well, thank you.". His gaze, filled with curiosity, traveled from Deborah to Victoria. He raised his eyebrows at the sheriff "I take it you're a lawman? I beg your pardon—law woman?"

Sheriff Vic looked down at the star pinned to her vest. For a moment, Deborah thought she was going to buff it with the back of her shirtsleeve. Instead, she smiled. "Yes, sir, I am the sheriff of Brokken, Texas."

Victoria's eyes had brightened. She was as taken with this strange man as Deborah was.

The man's dimples deepened. "Brokken, Texas? What a coincidence. I'm traveling to Brokken myself." His smile revealed straight white teeth, and he canted his head in Deborah's direction. "And is this your posse?" His grin was teasing, infectious.

Deborah found herself smiling in response and repressed a silly giggle. "No, sir. I'm only a rancher's daughter."

Sheriff Vic cast her a sideways glance with a warning in it and cleared her throat before Deborah could say more. "We were visiting some of Miss Brokken's relatives."

The man drew his brows down in thoughtful contemplation, probably wondering why Victoria was wearing the star pinned to her vest if they were only visiting. In a second, his face cleared, and he gave a nod, as if satisfied.

Victoria glanced again at Deborah, as if to judge her reaction, and then back to Mr. Caper. Her shoulders visibly relaxed. "I'm Mrs. English, and this is Miss Deborah Brokken."

"Brokken? The same name as the town?" His gaze sought Deborah's again.

The heat in her cheeks intensified, and she longed for a fan to clear away the blush she knew was there. She cleared her throat and spoke, her voice soft. "Yes, sir. My father established the town. Did you say you are traveling there?"

"Yes, I am." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a newspaper clipping. After he smoothed it out, he showed it to them, as if it was something he was particularly proud of. "I corresponded with a young lady by the name of Lavendar Lilley."

This time, Deborah could not suppress her giggle. Victoria gave her



a stern look, and Deborah lowered her eyes and bit her lower lip. What was wrong with her? She'd never behaved this way before.

The train slowly gained speed, and Deborah turned her attention to the folks on the platform waving goodbye. It was some minutes before she'd regained her composure, long after they were in open country. To quit behaving like a silly school girl, it was best to keep her gaze away from those sky-blue eyes. She half listened as Victoria greatly exaggerated Lavendar's virtuous qualities.

A pang of jealousy over lucky Lavendar Lilley shot through her. Deborah had not wanted any part of the mail-order scheme, but that was before she had caught sight of Mr. Caper's blue eyes, dark hair, and tall stature. The heat climbed to her cheeks again. Her grandparents would be appalled if they knew what she was thinking.

When there was a lull in the conversation, she gave Mr. Caper a quick glance, shifted her gaze to her hands, and spoke. "Lavendar is such a dear. You've never met anyone sweeter." And, thankfully, she was able to speak without giggling.



CHANCE STARED AT A point over his brother's shoulder and remained rigid, his lips firmly pressed together. The wagon was in his line of sight with Danny on the seat, his elbows on his knees. The area was filled with people, too many people. The train was filling up. He hadn't expected this many to be traveling.

Daniel leaned in closer and lowered his voice. "You can't mean to pay passage for that mangy mutt. I'm sure there are plenty of dogs in Brokken. Why waste my money?"

Chance had not spoken a word but now was goaded beyond endurance. He raised a brow. "Your money?"

Daniel licked his lips before he cleared his throat. "We'll take good care of Rascal. Leave him here."

"Who will care for him? You or Danny?" Neither had ever taken an interest in his dog, or for that matter, any of the other animals on the farm.

"Danny will. You know he's a good boy who only needs direction." His gaze traveled to his son, his face beaming. Danny either didn't see or ignored him.

His anger toward his brother had not abated but grown stronger since a week ago when told he had to leave. Chance shook his head and kept his voice level. "I'm keeping Rascal with me. He's loaded in the baggage area in a crate, and I already paid ..."

His brother swung his free arm toward the ticket office. "I'm sure they'll give you the money back."

"The subject is closed," he said through clenched teeth without

turning his head. He focused on the train beyond the wagon. Daniel had purchased the ticket, without consulting him, and told him he'd found him work. Daniel had been vague about the details.

Chance did not trust his brother and doubted a job awaited him at the end of this trip. But what choice did he have? His brother wanted him gone. In a few minutes, he'd board. The thought of being confined on the train among strangers worried him, and he lingered, wanting to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

He inhaled deeply and let it out slowly, something his mother had taught him to do whenever he "got in a fix," as she termed it. A group of passengers jostled past, and Chance sidestepped them.

Daniel rubbed his chin and then touched Chance's arm. "I told you the town was looking for men to work. What I didn't tell you is they're looking for a bit more..."

"What do you mean?" His gaze fully met his brother's for the first time that day.

Daniel appeared embarrassed, something Chance had thought him incapable of. The tips of his ears reddened as he shifted his weight on the cane. "The town is full of women, mostly widows, looking for husbands. I took the liberty of corresponding with a Miss Wanda Waldruff. She's not a widow woman, but her pa was killed in the War, and she doesn't have any kin."

Chance narrowed his eyes. "Women advertised for men?"

"That's the gist of it. This Miss Waldruff wants to be married... to you."

Anger surged through him. "I have no intention of marrying Miss Waldruff or anyone else. You had no right to correspond in my name."

Daniel waved his free hand. "What's done is done. I figured it's the only way you'll find a woman. She'll be waiting to meet you when you arrive." He scratched his head. "Well, not right away. The sheriff will be interviewing the men to check their suitability. That's how Miss Waldruff put it."

"I'm afraid Miss Waldruff will be disappointed. I'll explain to the sheriff I arrived under false pretenses due to my brother's deceit." He clenched his teeth so hard that the muscles in his jaw ached.

His brother laughed harshly. "I'm sure she'll get over her disappointment once she learns who you are."

Chance took a step to fully face his brother, his feet firmly planted. "So, if I'm not accepted by this Miss Waldruff, there will be no job at the stockyard?"

"Her pa owned it, and she's been struggling to run it by herself. I'm sure she'll find something for you to do." He searched his pockets and pulled out a packet of letters. "Here's the correspondence, something you can read on your journey, and there's the advertisement." He

poked at the clipping torn from a newspaper.

His brother shook the packet of letters at him, and after a moment, Chance relaxed his stance. He'd take the letters. He needed to know what had been said.

To his embarrassment, tears pricked the back of his eyes when his hand touched his brother's. This was not the way he should behave, especially after what their country had just endured, and considering it likely they'd never see each other again. He forced himself to speak civilly. "You were only doing what you thought best." He gave his brother an awkward pat on his shoulder. "I need to board the train."

A mournful wail sounded the moment he spoke. To his surprise, Daniel gripped Chance's arm and gave it a squeeze. "Have faith. It'll work out for you."

Chance adjusted the leather bag containing all his worldly possessions. "I'll send you a telegram when I arrive."

Daniel shook his head. "Save your money. Write a letter when you can."

Chance nodded, walked toward the train, and joined the crowd boarding. Four or five men were ahead of him, and he was the last to board. His eyes took a moment to adjust, and he stood for a moment to orient himself and let his gaze sweep the interior of the car.

The conductor was having none of that and motioned Chance along. Almost every seat was taken. Where were all these people going? Surely not to Brokken, Texas?

The conductor indicated an empty seat already occupied by a gentleman around his age. Chance glanced around the compartment. Two ladies sat across from the man, one wearing a badge on her suede vest. The other young lady glanced toward him briefly, and dark turquoise eyes met his, disconcerting him. The conductor nudged him forward.

The seated man broke off an animated conversation with the ladies and spoke to him. His flash of teeth appeared more a challenge than a greeting. "A fellow passenger," he said and rose to allow Chance to store his bag. Before he sat back down, the man gestured. "Do you prefer the window or aisle?"

Neither was to his liking—sitting where people brushed by or where he'd be confined in a corner. Sitting across from the young lady was out of the question. She'd expect him to make small talk. "I'd rather sit next to the aisle, if that suits you."

The man slid over, and Chance took his seat beside him. Chance gave a vague nod in the direction of the ladies in greeting.

The man next to him extended a hand. "Since we're traveling companions, allow me to introduce myself. I'm Klint Caper, and these lovely ladies are Mrs. English and Miss Brokken. Mrs. English is the

sheriff of Brokken, Texas.”

Chance widened his eyes. “The sheriff of Brokken?”

“You, too?” Mrs. English said. She smiled and gestured at his hand.

Her words confused him at first. He followed her line of sight to the letters he still held with the advertisement on top.

Mr. Caper pointed to it also. “I have one just like it. Here we are, answering the advertisement, along with several more men, I assume.” He swung an arm to indicate the train filled mostly with men. “I am correct that you are one of the proposed grooms?”

Chance shook his head. “No, sir.” He hesitated. His aversion to airing his dirty laundry kept his angry words from spilling forth. He stuck the letters in his pocket. “I’m in need of a job but have no interest in marriage. I’m afraid there may have been a misunderstanding. A Miss Waldruff is under the misconception that I corresponded with her.”

Sheriff English studied him. “Misconception? What exactly do you mean?”

Chance shrugged. “Someone else corresponded with her in my name.”

She gave a half smile. “Miss Waldruff is a lovely young woman. You can explain to her when we reach Brokken. And who knows? You might find her a pleasing companion and change your mind.”

“I heard the sheriff ... is in charge of this arrangement...” He broke off. Maybe he was speaking at the wrong time.

“It’s true I am checking the background of the men coming into our town. However, if you have no intention of marriage, you can handle that on your own. Speak to Miss Waldruff when we arrive.”

He nodded.

The younger lady spoke in his direction. “I don’t believe I caught your name.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve failed to introduce myself. My name is Chance Hale.” He now wished he’d taken the window seat to have somewhere else to focus. The face of the woman who sat across from Mr. Caper filled his vision, and he found it difficult to turn away.



## Chapter Three

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As the train lurched suddenly, Mr. Caper twisted in his seat and caught Chance by his shoulder to steady himself. "Pardon me," he said, as he released him.

Chance was glad of the jolt. It had helped him to look away from Miss Brokken. He leaned back, lowered his hat, and hoped he was at least partially hidden.

But he had a short respite. Mr. Caper placed his hand on his arm. "Did you say your name was Chance Hale? Chance Hale from the Battle of Gettysburg?"

"I was in many battles," Chance mumbled. He shrank farther back and tried to escape the man's scrutiny.

Mr. Caper addressed the ladies sitting across from him. "No one expected him to survive the war. 'Not a Chance in Hale' was his nickname."

The reminder embarrassed him, and he pulled his hat even lower over his eyes.

"Mr. Caper, your language," the sheriff said.

Mr. Caper laughed. "Consider it Hale, as in his last name. Some of the things he did were unbelievable. Men gave odds of him surviving the War with his exploits."

Chance's throat began to close on him. He crossed his arms and blocked out their voices. If anyone else questioned him, he planned to make his escape.

"I believe I've heard of you," the sheriff said. "Can you tell me ..."

Chance was on his feet, mumbling an excuse. He'd find Rascal, who was somewhere on the train, in the baggage compartment, wherever that was. He stumbled down the narrow aisle, not looking back.

The sheriff's words carried to him. "What in the world got into him?"



DEBORAH WATCHED MR. Hale scramble away and frowned. "He's a strange one."

Strange but attractive, although not as attractive as Mr. Caper. The ladies should be well pleased with these two. Certainly, if Mr. Hale rejected Wanda, since he claimed he did not correspond with her, others would vie for his attention

Although his clothes were of a simpler cut than Mr. Caper's and

not as well maintained, his build was similar, tall and slim. His hair had been long and shaggy beneath the hat he'd never removed. The one time he'd really looked at her, she'd caught sight of a pair of strangely colored eyes, pale gray lined with navy blue. Unworldly, as if he could see beyond the material world. She shook her head at her fanciful imaginings. Nothing like Mr. Caper's sky-blue eyes that crinkled at the corners with good humor.

She caught sight of Mr. Caper watching her. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me to say."

"Well, if you knew his story ..." He paused and leaned forward. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Some say he killed ... or murdered ... many men. Of course, it's not my place to speak of it."

Deborah gasped and exchanged a look with Victoria. "But isn't that what war is about? The killing of others?"

He shrugged. "There's more to what happened than engagement in battle."

She leaned forward to ask another question until she caught the sternness in Victoria's eyes. It convinced her to let the subject drop.

She dipped her head in Mr. Caper's direction. "I need to close my eyes for a few minutes. I have the most awful headache."

Mr. Caper was immediately solicitous. "Would you like me to fetch you a glass of water?"

Deborah waved his concerns away. "I'm sure the headache will ease shortly." She allowed the back of her head to press against the seat and closed her eyes. Her mind drifted, imagined what life would be like if she, instead of Lavendar, married Mr. Caper. With his intelligence and charm, he'd make an excellent rancher—although she wasn't sure how charm would play into it. Her grandparents would never agree, of course, even though she was nineteen and old enough to make her own decisions. Maybe she could persuade them to move into the cabin by the lake.

No, the cabin was where she wanted to live. Her family had spent many holidays there, before the War, when they were still happy. If she married, she might have a chance to regain a bit of bliss.

A smile played on her lips. She'd have to convince her grandparents that she no longer needed them, and it'd be easier to do if she married. They could forget their plans to take her to Boston, to marry someone of their choosing. Let them move to Boston, and she, with her new husband, would move into the cabin. She'd be Mrs. Hale.

She gasped. *Mrs. Caper*. She meant Mrs. Caper. How could she imagine that strange man as her husband? A man who may have murdered someone, if what Mr. Caper said was true? She relaxed her muscles and tried to conjure the image of Mr. Caper again. Instead,

Mr. Hale's image wavered before her, and she dozed dreaming of him.



CHANCE FOUND RASCAL and made sure he had water and food. The baggage car was stale and strange odors lingered, but Chance didn't leave. He'd wait until darkness gathered beyond the windows to return to his seat, or maybe he'd stay put.

Rascal dug at the boards until Chance pried the slats on top off and lifted him out. His dog greeted his release with enthusiasm.

Chance patted his sides and spoke soothingly. "It's all right, boy. We'll be at our new home soon." Their new home? He felt nauseated at what lay ahead. He had to speak to Wanda Waldruff, tell her it was not he who had responded to her letters. He doubted seriously if she'd want him around after that, no matter how many jobs were available. And what could he do then? Would there be other jobs?

He sighed deeply. There was no use in speculating. With nothing to be done, he pulled his old frock coat out of the crate and shook it out. He used the government-issued coat as a bed for Rascal, as good a use for it as any.

He spread it on the floor to serve for his own bed, and Rascal joined him, curling up beside him. He smoothed the dog's fur and spoke words softly, as much to comfort himself as his dog.

He closed his eyes and searched for the relief of his worries in sleep.





A rough hand shook Chance awake. “No sleeping in here, mister.”

The conductor held a lantern and swung it close to his face.

Chance put up an arm to block its blinding light, and a deep, low growl emanated from beside him. “Shh, Rascal. It’s all right.”

“Did you let that dog out? Has he done any damage in here?” The conductor swung the lantern in a larger arc, sending creatures scurrying for the shadows.

“There’s no damage,” Chance answered. He leaned forward with his forehead across his arms, the nausea worsening.

The man jerked him to his feet. “Get your dog back in the crate and then go to your seat.”

Chance grabbed his frock coat from the floor to put back in the crate. The conductor moved closer with his lantern. Chance turned sideways, out of the light, but that did not stop the conductor from touching the fabric, to inspect it.

“I thought it was green.” His voice sounded incredulous. He raised his gaze to search Chance’s features.

For a moment, he didn’t speak. Finally, Chance shrugged. “What if it is?”

The man placed a hand on his arm and spoke quietly, reverentially. “Does it belong to you?”

Chance sighed heavily before he nodded and shook off the man’s grasp. The old frock coat went back into the crate followed by Rascal.

He pressed the boards together the best he could and slammed the heel of his hand against them, hoping they’d hold. “Will you show me the way to my seat?” he asked the man’s shadowy figure.

The conductor gave a nod. “I’ll come back later and make sure your dog is secure. He’ll be well cared for, I assure you. Follow me.”

When they reached the passenger car, the conductor stopped and turned to face him. “May I get you a bite to eat or something to drink?”

“A glass of water will do. Thank you.” As queasy as he felt, food was out of the question.

“I’ll be back in a moment.” The man moved away, and Chance was left with little light to see by.

He moved so his back was to the outer wall of the passenger car, to feel safer, protected.

The conductor returned with his water. He thanked him and drained every drop. After he gave the glass back to the conductor, he

wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Goodnight," he said, with all the politeness he could muster.

The conductor bowed his head. "Goodnight, sir. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything. I'll be at the end of the car." His arm swung to indicate the direction. "I'll hold the light steady until you reach your seat."

Chance gave a nod and headed to his seat, guided by the conductor's light. Not everyone thought poorly of him, judging by the conductor's treatment. But the conductor didn't know the whole story, he was sure.

The two ladies and Mr. Caper all appeared to be asleep. He slid into his seat quietly, stretched his legs as far as he could, tilted his hat over his eyes, and soon joined them.



DEBORAH AWOKE, STRETCHED, and yawned. By the thin rays of sunlight streaming through the window, she noted Mr. Hale had returned sometime during the night. His hat had fallen from his head, and his tousled hair fell in curls across his forehead. He still slept as did Victoria and Mr. Caper. Deborah did not want to disturb them but a trip to the necessary was in order.

Silently, she rose from her seat and moved forward. Mr. Hale's legs blocked her path. She raised her skirts in anticipation of stepping over when he moved and opened his eyes. He blinked sleepily, and a smile curved his lips as if he'd awakened from a pleasant dream. His gaze found hers, and she froze, mesmerized by his eyes. He did not attempt to look away but remained relaxed, his face open to her. And his smile broadened, crinkled around his eyes, and made her insides turn into a comforting warmth that drew her closer. His legs remained outstretched, and he lifted a hand, as if to reach for her.

Mr. Caper spoke cheerfully for so early in the morning. "Good morning, Miss Brokken, Mr. Hale. I trust you slept well?"

Deborah stiffened, and Mr. Hale, with a visible effort, sat straighter and twisted in his seat to face Mr. Caper. He gave a nod before his gaze shifted back to Deborah, not meeting her eyes. Awkwardly, he stood and moved backwards, into the aisle. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I was blocking your path." His voice was husky, whether with sleep or another emotion, she didn't know.

Deborah did not trust her own voice. She made her escape without speaking or looking back.



CHANCE SLID BACK INTO his seat and shook his head, endeavoring to shake the cobwebs loose. He'd been dreaming of a woman ... surely

not Miss Brokken, someone he'd only met the day before? He blew a breath out slowly and allowed his eyes to slide shut and endeavored to recapture the dream. He granted himself the luxury of imagining a life with Miss Brokken before chastising himself.

How foolish could he be? His best bet was to steer clear of all women or face more heartache. The faster he got off this train, the better, far away from Miss Brokken.

No woman would have him, not after what he'd done—no decent woman anyway, certainly not Miss Brokken.

But why had she moved toward him in that way, with that look on her face? He shook his head. She was only trying to get by.

The attraction between Miss Brokken and Mr. Caper was obvious, and he could not compete with someone like that. He had everything Chance did not.

He tightened his jaw, surprised at the emotion he felt. *Jealousy ...* he was jealous of Mr. Caper. He almost snorted his derision. Why would he be jealous when he had no plans of marrying any woman?

Let Mr. Caper have Miss Brokken, if he wanted her. All he wanted was to find a job, a job to keep body and soul together, preferably far away from people, especially women. He was tired of their scorn, their questions ... even their admiration. He breathed heavily and noted Mr. Caper chattered beside him, although he had no idea what the man said.

Chance's hat had fallen on the seat beside him, and he smoothed back his hair and replaced it, pulling it low over his forehead. If he'd had any sense, he would have changed his name. But how was he supposed to know he'd meet someone like Mr. Caper straight off, someone who knew at least some of his past actions?

The anger, jealousy, whatever it was, drained from him, and Mr. Caper's words finally reached him. "...be there soon," he said. The man had his hand on his arm.

Chance stiffened and pulled away. "Sorry, Mr. Caper. I didn't catch what you were saying." He spoke softly since the sheriff still slept across from them.

"I was pointing out that if my calculations are correct, we'll be arriving in Brokken in an hour or maybe sooner." His smile broadened.

Chance gave a nod at the good news. He'd be able to get away from Miss Brokken as well as Mr. Caper, who, it seemed, never stopped talking.

He rose to his feet, not wanting to be present when the lady returned. "I need to check on my dog." The excuse seemed to satisfy Mr. Caper, and Chance walked away.

The conductor from last night met him, his face wreathed in a

smile. "Good morning, sir." He leaned in closer. "Would you like a cup of coffee? We don't offer it to passengers, normally, but in your case, I will make an exception, after what you did for our country."

Although the coffee would be welcomed, Chance shook his head. He did not want any special treatment, especially for what he had done. "No, thank you, but I appreciate your offer," he said with an effort. Although he obviously meant well, the conductor didn't know how misguided he was in his admiration,

The man did not allow him to pass but pulled a watch from his pocket. "Sir, you might wish to know we will be arriving twenty minutes early. We've made good time."

Chance nodded and attempted a smile.

"Are you sure you don't want coffee?" Another passenger commanded the conductor's attention, and the man finally moved and allowed him passage.

Only forty minutes until he could escape the train. Relief flooded him as he made his way to the baggage car. Rascal greeted him with a yelp and whine. The conductor had been true to his word and reinforced the crate.

Chance dropped to his knees and stuck his fingers through the slats. This had been a long trip for his dog, as it had been for him. To be confined like this was inhumane, and he kicked himself for allowing it. He should have traveled by horse or wagon, let his dog run along beside him. It was too late now.

He rubbed the dog's fur, what he could reach. "It won't be long, boy, and you'll be free."

The words were like a stone sinking to the pit of his stomach. He considered again what awaited him when he stepped off the platform, onto the streets of Brokken. He'd have to confront Miss Wanda Waldruff and tell her it was all a mistake. It was doubtful she'd hire him. After all, she didn't want someone to work at the stockyard—she wanted a husband.

He sat back on his heels. Perhaps he was wrong to reject the notion of marriage out of hand. Wasn't it possible he could find happiness, and if not happiness, companionship? He held his head in his hands for a moment and cursed himself. He'd momentarily forgotten that was not the problem. It wasn't his happiness but hers that mattered. No woman would ever be happy with him; no one would ever understand what he had done and would look at him with distrust in their eyes. He shrugged. Why not let the woman make the decision? If she wanted to turn down his proposal, it wouldn't be the end of the world. He knew nothing of this woman and maybe he should discover more.

He pulled out the packet of letters, settled back, and began to read

as Brokken grew closer. After a few minutes, he looked up, contemplating what he'd read. The wistfulness in the letters touched him, attracted him. Her picture, enclosed in one of the earliest dated letters, showed a young, attractive woman. With such good looks, she was far from desperate. He doubted if she'd accept him, or rather his brother's version of him. But would it hurt to find out, to play the part?

What did he have to lose?



Deborah lingered for as long as she dared. The sheriff would be coming to find her any moment. When she made it back to her seat, she was relieved to find Mr. Hale missing. Her cheeks still burned from her reaction to his lazy smile. What must he think of her?

But his behavior had been odd also. Perhaps Mr. Hale had been dreaming—unlike her. Some folks dreamed with their eyes wide open, and he must be one of them. He certainly had *not* been reacting to her. His lazy smile and lift of his hand sent shivers down her spine, even now. Flustered, she barely heard Mr. Caper's words. Sheriff Vic had awoken, and she gave Deborah a curious look but, thankfully, didn't question her.

Deborah pulled a book from her carpetbag and opened it to a random page. It didn't matter what page. None of the words made sense to her. Each time someone walked by, she started, thinking it was Mr. Hale. It wasn't until the train let out a long mournful wail that he returned, giving but a nod to indicate his acknowledgment of the others, including her, she supposed.

Even so, her heart beat wildly, from embarrassment, she was sure. She kept her nose in her book, afraid she'd be pulled in by those eyes again. She didn't have to worry. A sideways glance showed he kept his hat pulled low, and his eyes downcast.

The train lurched to a halt after the few minutes from the whistle to the arrival at the depot having stretched to an eternity. The ranch beckoned her, a haven away from Chance Hale and all the emotions he stirred within her. All she had to do was get on the wagon with their foreman, Isaac, and head home. She hadn't counted on the train arriving twenty minutes early and Isaac nowhere in sight.

She joined the crowd on the platform, with only her carpetbag on her arm. Several ladies strolled by when they disembarked, taking a keen interest in the men milling about. Deborah's legs were weak, from her long travel, and she scanned the crowd in vain for Mr. Isaac.

The sheriff touched her arm to gain her attention. "I'll be out to the ranch later, Deborah. I need to sleep in my own bed for a day or two before I can function again." And she hurried away before Deborah responded.

As she waited on the platform, she spotted Lavendar arriving with Miss Sophia. Deborah stifled a laugh behind her gloved hand and wondered what her reaction would be to Mr. Caper. Unlike the other ladies, Lavendar waited patiently beside Miss Sophia. Wanda stood



near them also and stopped for a moment to consider Mr. Caper before her glance moved to Mr. Hale. Somehow, she knew Mr. Hale was her intended. A shy smile landed on her lips, and she dipped her head in approval.

Deborah walked down to greet her, and Wanda gave her a hug, holding to her for a moment to whisper, "Did you happen to meet Mr. Hale?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." She turned to see him only a few feet away.

If she could get him interested in Miss Waldruff, perhaps her heart would cease to betray her. Deborah smiled in his direction and made a slight motion of her head. He took the hint and moved closer.

"Miss Waldruff, may I introduce Mr. Hale?"

To her surprise, he swept the hat, that hat he'd hidden behind, off his head to reveal his unusual gray eyes. His elusive smile returned. To give them a little privacy, Deborah turned toward Lavendar and Miss Sophie. She said words she had no recollection of afterwards.

Wanda did not tarry long, probably remembering that she was not supposed to meet her intended except under Preacher Grisson's watchful eye. Deborah glared at Wanda's retreating back before she remembered she had no need for jealousy. She had no interest in Mr. Hale, certainly not after what Mr. Caper had told her. Mr. Hale would be very happy with Wanda who was an intelligent, kind woman, a couple of years Deborah's senior, and she hoped Wanda would find happiness also. Even though Mr. Hale had said he didn't want to marry, his behavior indicated otherwise.

This was what Deborah wanted, the couple's obvious attraction to each other, but for some reason, pain lingered in her heart. She turned her attention back to Lavendar.

Her friend's breath came in quick gasps, so typical of Lavendar when she became overexcited. "We wanted to meet the train, to escort the men to the hotel. Miss Sophie and I came as quickly as we could." She put a hand to her chest, as if it could calm her, and smiled.

Mr. Hale stepped closer to Deborah, and she was keenly aware of his presence. When Mr. Caper moved between Mr. Hale and Deborah, she was happy for the distraction.

Lavendar's violet eyes lit up with appreciation, and she gave a warm smile.

"This is one of the intended grooms," Deborah said. "Mr. Klint Caper."

A hand flew up to cover Lavendar's mouth. "Mr. Caper?" A pleasing shade of rose covered her cheeks.

"Mr. Caper, this is Lavendar Lilley whom I understand you've corresponded with."

She moved back to allow Mr. Caper to have a moment of privacy to meet his intended bride. Unfortunately, it put her closer to Mr. Hale.

He cleared his throat and spoke softly. "Someone told me to come over here?"

His voice alone sent shivers up her spine, and she bit her bottom lip to regain control. "Yes, that's Miss Sophia, the owner of the hotel where you'll be staying." Far away from Brokken Arrow Ranch, thank goodness.

More men from the train gathered around, at least twenty. Miss Sophia took charge and spoke.

Deborah took the opportunity to pull Lavendar away. She gave her friend's arm a shake and whispered. "I didn't know all of these men replied to the advertisement."

Lavendar's blush deepened. "You've been gone three weeks, and we had many men, more than we dreamed of, to answer our advertisements. Preacher Grisson has had a time of keeping it all organized. Of course, Miss Sophia and I helped."

Miss Sophia still spoke and gracefully swung her good arm. "Leave your luggage on the platform. Someone will bring it to the hotel in a few minutes."

Deborah frowned at Lavendar and leaned closer to whisper. "Do you have room for all of these men? We're supposed to take the overflow to the ranch. I didn't think we'd need to until the next group arrived."

Lavendar's eyes widened, and then she smiled. "Oh, I forgot you've been gone. Your grandparents agreed to take the overflow. Some of the men will double up at the hotel."

Miss Sophia continued speaking and now said. "If you'll follow Miss Lilley, she will show you where you will be staying."

Deborah entwined her arm with Lavendar's. For a moment, Lavendar's feet stayed firmly planted. She looked around and smiled at Mr. Caper, and only when he began moving in the direction of the hotel, did Lavendar follow suit. Luckily, the hotel was not far from the depot.

A dog ran ahead of them until Mr. Hale gave a short whistle. The dog returned to walk beside him. Lavendar moved closer, pulling Deborah with her. "What's the dog's name? May I pet him?"

Mr. Hale nodded, and paused to allow Lavendar to kneel, to speak softly, before holding her hand for the dog to sniff. The other men, seeing the hotel's sign, continued their way, including Mr. Caper, leaving the three of them behind.

Lavendar seemed to have forgotten Mr. Caper as she continued petting the dog. "How does he get along with cats? Squirrels? Umm ...

rabbits?"

Mr. Hale tilted his hat back with his thumb and glanced at Deborah, a smile playing on his lips. She hoped her face was impassive but knew it was not.

She forced herself to focus on Lavendar. "Dogs chase all of those animals."

"Rascal doesn't chase cats," Mr. Hale replied. "He got along fine with the barn cats at home." His voice held a wistful tone, as if he was homesick.

Deborah had not considered why he'd left home, to travel here to Brokken. Her curiosity was piqued, but she ruthlessly squelched it and decided to leave Lavendar with Mr. Hale. She continued toward the hotel.

Isaac waited for her and jumped down from the wagon seat when he saw her. She ran to him and took his hand. "I'm so glad to be home." Tears threaten to fall, and she pulled back to gently chastise him. "I thought you'd meet me at the depot."

"I've only just arrived in town and saw the group walking toward the hotel. I figured you'd be with them." His smile broadened. "I'm glad you're back, Miss Deborah. I've had a time of it with your grandparents."

Deborah sighed. "You can tell me all about it later. From what Lavendar told me, we're going to have to take some of these men home with us."

"I've already arranged it with Miss Sophia. That advertisement did its job." His eyes swept over the men crowded around. He dropped his voice. "Wasn't the sheriff going to check them out before we took them to the ranch?"

"Preacher Grisson was supposed to handle that while we were gone. I don't think Sheriff Vic expected so many, though, and I'm not sure how thorough a job he has done. Her father hasn't spoken to you?"

"No. Not a word."

Someone near them muttered, "What's Miss Brokken doing with the darky?"

Another voice answered, "He's the Brokken Arrow foreman."

Deborah twisted around to see who spoke. There were too many men crowded around to be sure.

Mr. Hale arrived with Lavendar, but he had pulled his hat low over his eyes again. His hat hid his hypnotic eyes, and Deborah felt both disappointed and thankful. Although he had stopped near them, she didn't bother introducing him to Isaac. He'd stay at the hotel, and she'd never have to see him again. Even if he stayed in Brokken and married Miss Waldruff, she'd make sure she stayed far away from him.

Lavendar beckoned Deborah, worry in her eyes. "I don't think Miss Sophia wants a dog in the hotel, though I think it'd be lovely." Her worried eyes searched Deborah's, and she stepped closer to whisper. "Although, to tell the truth, it does concern me some. Please don't tell Miss Sophia, but sometimes I bring the babies with me to work."

"Babies?"

"Bunnies and squirrels—those who've lost their mothers."

Deborah nodded in sympathy. Still, she'd rather not have Chance Hale on the ranch where she was more likely to see him. "Speak to Miss Sophia, to see if she will allow it ..." Her words trailed off when she caught sight of Lavendar's pale face.

Deborah didn't want Mr. Hale at the ranch, but neither did she want to put Lavendar's pets in danger. She glanced toward where he stood. Although his hat remained pulled low, she suspected he watched her, and her breathing deepened. She grimaced and turned her back on him. "I suppose Mr. Hale and his dog can stay at the ranch."

Lavendar reacted by giving her a hug.

Deborah comforted herself with the fact that even on the ranch, she did not have to see that man. She would make a wide berth around the bunkhouse if she ever headed in that direction.

On the way home, she'd sit with Isaac up front, of course, so she wouldn't even know Mr. Hale was traveling with them. It was highly unlikely he would speak, and home was a short distance away.

She glanced over her shoulder at the man who caused her such turmoil. The sooner she got to the ranch, the better. She'd stay shut up in the house with her grandparents, willingly, until he married Miss Waldruff or moved on.



No one gave Chance a say in whether to stay at the hotel or not.

Everyone agreed Miss Sophia would not approve of a dog occupying one of the rooms, and so it was settled. It meant he'd have to climb in the back of the wagon, with Miss Brokken sitting in front of him, distracting him. They didn't have far to travel, from what he heard. The ranch lay on the northern outskirts of town.

After they were given refreshments at the hotel, the men staying headed to their rooms. Klint, as he'd now told Chance to call him, chose to go to Brokken Arrow Ranch. After giving everyone a lengthy explanation as to the propriety of staying at the hotel with his intended, though, as far as Chance could figure, Miss Lilley had a home of her own, he climbed in the back of the wagon and sank down beside Chance and Rascal. The other men going to the ranch soon joined them.

Klint was in a happy mood although that wasn't unusual. Chance had yet to see him when he wasn't. The men exchanged stories of battles, even though some had been in the Confederacy and others with the Union army. Chance kept silent, although he had his own stories to tell, and even versions of their own that they knew nothing of.

Klint dug an elbow in his ribs when they passed the Brokken Bank and then the Brokken General Store. He leaned in closer, so close that Rascal shrank away and let out a low growl. Chance shushed him and gave him a pat to let him know all was well.

"Looks like the Brokkens own half the town," Klint whispered.

It made no difference to Chance, who stiffened and leaned away, hoping Klint would notice that he was in no mood to talk.

One of the other men, Joshua Franklin, motioned with his thumb to Miss Brokken on the seat beside Mr. Isaac. He whispered, a little too loudly. "That's the sister. I heard tell her brothers ran off with the town's money."

"It's none of our business," Chance responded and narrowed his eyes at the man. He shifted his position, given himself room to move quickly if need be.

His words didn't diminish the man's beaming demeanor. He leaned forward to peer under Chance's hat. "Don't I know you? You sure look familiar."

Chance shrugged, pulled his hat farther down, and draped his arms over his knees, forcing the man back.

Klint nudged his ribs again. "This is Chance Hale." He spoke with pride, as if he was some prized hog.

"Chance Hale? That name sounds familiar ..." Mr. Franklin snapped his fingers. "He's that Union Sharpshooter." He fell back on his heels and rubbed the back of his thumb against his lower lip.

Chance jerked his head up to glare at Klint, still sitting too close. That smiling face needed punching. "Why did you tell him my name?" he growled.

Immediately, Klint was contrite, and he leaned even closer. "Sorry, Chance. They were bound to find out sooner or later."

When Chance turned his attention back to the other men, they had fallen silent, and most looked in his direction, some with rounded, fearful eyes.

Chance would ask Mr. Isaac to stop, and he'd walk the rest of the way to the ranch. What he'd do when he got there, he didn't know.

The wagon lurched, and Isaac struggled for a minute to control the horses before pulling them to a halt. The men scrambled from the wagon and, somehow, Chance had no notion how, Klint reached Miss Brokken first and helped her descend from the lopsided wagon.

One glance showed the wheel had broken. Several men gathered to give Mr. Isaac a hand in the unhitching of the mules. When the others gave him a wide berth, Chance hoisted his bag to his shoulder and moved away to the side and waited with Rascal

After a few minutes, Miss Brokken spoke quietly with her foreman. Mr. Isaac tilted his head, took off his cap, and wiped away sweat from his dark brow. Although only early March, the day had been warm.

The sunset in the west filled half the sky, and Chance focused on it. If things did not work out with Miss Waldruff, he'd head west, change his name, and start anew. How he'd do that with no money, no horse, and no rifle, he didn't know. He'd traded his rifle in for a revolver, still in his bag, along with a holster. It had been a foolish thing to do, but he had his reasons. Maybe he could sell the revolver, use the money for a train ticket.

It was possible he might have some luck with Miss Waldruff. She'd seemed perfectly amiable when they'd met. The question was how she'd feel when she learned of his past. She'd have to know before any courting commenced.

And, if she did reject him, he had another option. Mr. Isaac looked like an intelligent, reasonable man. Maybe Chance could work on the ranch for a few months, earn enough money to make a fresh start. He'd have to avoid Miss Brokken, somehow. Even now, she drew his attention, and his dream came back to haunt him, stirred up feelings that rose to the surface to tighten his chest. He cursed himself and took off his hat to run his fingers through his hair.

Mr. Isaac put two fingers to his lips and let loose a shrill whistle, motioning the men over. They gathered 'round, and Chance replaced his hat. He hovered on the edge of the group.

"Listen, men. It's getting late. Miss Brokken has decided to walk the rest of the way home. We have another wagon at the ranch, but these are our only mules."

"Not much of a ranch if you've only got two mules," Franklin mumbled. Several men laughed.

Someone shushed the man, but Mr. Isaac had heard as had Miss Brokken. She flushed with anger and stepped closer.

She enunciated every word clearly. "Everyone has suffered after the War, and we are rebuilding. We can only do that by working together. As most of you know, the town was founded by my father. Although I am not the one in charge and have no say in final decisions, I will discuss any rude behavior with the sheriff and her father, Preacher Grisson."

"You mean we have to work with the Brokkens or else?" Franklin challenged her.

The question hung in the air unanswered except by a steel glint in Miss Brokken's eyes. Chance's breath quickened, and the tightness in his chest increased.

A few of the men moved restlessly, muttering, and after someone gave Franklin a shove, he whipped his hat off his head. "I meant no disrespect, Miss Brokken." After another nudge, he added, "Mr. Isaac."

Miss Brokken shot a glance at her foreman and cleared her throat. "If you don't like our ranch, if you don't want to work together, the Brokken Road that brought you here can lead you away." She turned on her heel and left them standing there.

Klint grabbed his bag from the wagon and motioned to Chance. "You coming?" He hurried after her, and the other men followed, moving slower.

Chance hung back until he gained control of his emotions and then walked over to Mr. Isaac. "Do you need help with the mules?"

"That'd be greatly appreciated. You have me at a disadvantage. I didn't catch your name."

It hadn't gone unnoticed that Miss Brokken had not introduced him to her foreman. "My name is Chance Hale. I'm in a bit of a dilemma. The other men"—he nodded in the direction they'd gone—"are uncomfortable around me."

"And why would that be?" Curiosity danced in the older man's eyes.

Chance shrugged. "I was a Sharpshooter in the Union army."

The man's forehead creased, his puzzlement evident. "And what does that mean, exactly?"



“It means some consider me a murderer.”



DEBORAH'S CHEEKS HAD not cooled although the temperature dropped as the sun set. An exasperated sigh escaped her lips when Mr. Caper caught up with her. She glanced beyond him but did not see Mr. Hale. All well and good if he decided to head back down the Brokken Road, back to where he'd come from.

Breathless, Mr. Caper spoke. "I'm sorry about Joshua Franklin back there. If he gives any more trouble, I'll take care of it."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "If we need your help, we'll ask for it. The Brokkens are not ..." Her voice faltered. What was she going to say? Not in need of help?

To tell the truth, her family could use help. If folks were to be believed, her father had betrayed the Confederacy, and her brothers had stolen most of the money from the bank.

And the ranch was far from thriving. Not to mention the bank had still not reopened, with no one qualified to run it. How capable was she? How much could she do to aright it all? Tears pricked her eyes.

She sighed loudly and peeked at Mr. Caper. His blue eyes sparkled in the dying light, lifting her spirits.

He moved closer, so close his arm brushed hers. "Are not what?" He flashed a smile. "Are not in need of help? I disagree. We can all use help from time to time, although from your speech back there, I see you are fully capable of holding your own."

She pressed her lips together and did not speak until they reached the gate leading into the ranch. None of the other men were in sight. She placed a hand on his arm that felt strong and capable. "Mr. Caper, I do need a favor."

"Whatever you wish, Miss Brokken." He placed a warm and comforting hand on top of hers.

She couldn't repress a smile. "Will you wait here for the rest of the men? The bunkhouse is close to the barn. You can't miss it. I'm sure supper is prepared, but I'll check to be sure on my way home."

"Of course, I will wait. It'll be my pleasure."

To her consternation, when she attempted to remove her hand, he took it in both of his and kissed it. She pulled her hand loose, slowly, and bid him goodnight. Mr. Caper was a fine man, but she did not like his flirtatious behavior, especially since he was promised to Lavendar. Her cheeks burned. Wasn't she the one who had been forward, placing her hand on his arm.

She took a deep breath and walked toward her beloved ranch. It took all her effort not to run all the way home.



Chance waited for Mr. Isaac to speak, but he said nothing. All the others had moved out of sight. Chance and Mr. Isaac led the mules at a slower pace. The silence between the two men was compatible, the walk pleasant. A cool breeze had picked up and the countryside, although not what he was used to, was appealing. The trees stood farther apart and did not tower above them like those back home. He had an affinity with trees. They'd served him well, especially during the War when he'd shimmy up one to get a better shot. If it'd been a particularly tall one in full leaf, the enemy had an almost impossible task of locating him in his green uniform.

Isaac, slightly ahead, pulled his mule to a stop, and Chance stopped beside him.

The older man tilted his head and removed his cap, swiping his forehead with his arm. "How old were you, Mr. Hale, when the War began?"

"Seventeen."

Mr. Isaac contemplated him for a few minutes, his dark eyes luminous. "How did you become a Sharpshooter?"

Despite all the heartache that had ensued, a smile played on Chance's lips. His selection had been a moment of great honor, had made his family proud.

He looked away before he spoke. "I have ... had eight brothers. Before the War, my brother Jonathan met and married a woman from Wisconsin. When his wife was lying in, for the delivery of their first child, my mother asked me to accompany her there from our home in Missouri." He fell silent for a moment, re-living the happy reunion. Jonathan's wife had delivered a healthy baby boy whom he had not seen since he joined the army.

He passed a hand over his face before he continued. "That was in the summer of 1861, before we knew the full extent—I reckon no one knew what this War would entail. We tarried longer than we'd planned, at my brother's, and I turned eighteen that fall." He moved to get a better view of Mr. Isaac who remained silent, his face composed.

"My brother told me Colonel Berdan was forming a regiment of Sharpshooters, but the men would have to pass a test to be considered. He said he was going, and I should too. Jonathan had faith in me, more faith than I had in myself. If it hadn't been for him ..."

“Did he become a Sharpshooter?” Mr. Isaac interrupted.

Chance shook his head, and to his consternation, a tear slid down his cheek. The errant tear was brushed away with the back of his hand. “He came close, but not perfect. You didn’t get a second chance to put ten shots in a ten-inch circle. Only one of his shots was outside the circle, by less than half an inch, but it was enough to disqualify him.” Chance shrugged. “I always thought God was with me that day when I was able to get all ten of mine in the circle, but maybe it was the devil.”

More tears pricked his eyes. The stress from the journey, being around so many folks, had taken a toll. Rascal sensed his distress and brushed against his leg. He knelt to pat his sides and stayed kneeling until the threat of tears abated.

“Let’s walk on,” Mr. Isaac said, as if he hadn’t noticed.

Chance climbed to the feet, and they walked for a few moments, long enough for Chance to speak with a level voice. “Missouri was divided over the War, even in our family. Two of my brothers joined the Confederacy—Daniel, my oldest brother, and Paul, who was just two years older than me.”

Paul had taught him how to fish. He had shown him the best places to look for worms, and then how to thread the worm on the hook. Most importantly, he taught him how to patiently wait for the nibble, to know the exact moment to set the hook. And later, they’d gone hunting together, but that had been a mistake, teaching him how to shoot. He looked up to see Mr. Isaac watching him.

Isaac’s voice was a soothing bass tone. “I know that must have been difficult for you and your family, to fight on opposite sides.”

Instead of comforting him, it did the opposite. Memories he’d kept pushed far from the light of day welled up, choking him. He swallowed hard and tried to still the shaking of his hands. He pulled the mule to a stop and leaned against him, as if the mule’s strength would give him enough courage to go on.

Mr. Isaac stepped beside him and placed a hand on his back. “Let it out son. You’ve been holding it in for too long.”

With the older man’s touch, the dam broke and sobs shook his shoulders. Mr. Isaac remained beside him and spoke words meant to comfort, but comfort no longer existed for him.

When the tears abated long enough for him to speak, Chance choked out the words he’d never spoken before. “Paul was a gunner for the Rebs. He stood to load the cannon, and men in uniform look alike.” Chance lifted a tear-stained face to Isaac and swiped his nose with his shirt-sleeve. “I shot him.”

His forehead touched the mule’s side. He waited for Mr. Isaac’s words to condemn him, but the man remained silent, his hand still on

his shoulder.

Dusk was gathering before he lifted his head again. Mr. Isaac pointed him to a nearby stream, and he went to wash the tears away, spending a few minutes to listen to the gurgling of the stream. Rascal had followed him and whined until he took a moment to run his palm over his dog's head, smoothing down the fur. He rose, feeling as if he'd marched twenty miles, as he did that day they advanced toward Yorktown. His weak legs returned him to where the older man stood with the mules.

Mr. Isaac waved an arm toward a trail up ahead. "Come with me, son."

Chance fell in step beside him. "Where are we going?"

"Miss Deborah's brothers have a shooting house near here. You can stay here for a few days. Being alone will do you good."

"You mean I ain't fit to be in the company of others." The bitterness twisted his mouth as he spat out the words. But hadn't he asked for this? To be alone?

He followed Mr. Isaac onto a narrower trail. It wasn't until they reached the cabin that Isaac again spoke. "You need time to contemplate your life and, more importantly, time to forgive yourself."

Chance shook his head. "There's no forgiveness for me. None."

"God's word teaches us to forgive others, and, believe it or not, that forgiveness extends to ourselves. Read your Bible. God's forgiveness reaches all, even you." He searched Chance's face and then held out the reins. "Hold the mules for a minute."

Chance did as he was told. Mr. Isaac entered the cabin and shortly reappeared. "I think you'll find all you need. Did you bring any food?"

Chance nodded. "Enough to get me by until tomorrow."

"Good. I'll be back to check on you." He hesitated a moment. "It'll be all right. Have faith." After patting his shoulder, he led the mules away.

Chance wiped his nose again with the back of his shirtsleeve. Hadn't that been Jonathan's words to him, right before he was chosen to be a Sharpshooter? Faith had never gotten him anywhere.



WHEN DEBORAH SAW MR. Hale had not arrived with the others, she rejoiced and thought her prayers had been answered. The next morning, she discovered otherwise.

"Why do I have to take him food?" Deborah asked irritably as she watched Isaac saddle his horse.

He turned to her. As always, Isaac's deep brown eyes contemplated her calmly. "Preacher Grisson has taken the men into town to meet

their intended brides. You're the only one here."

"I know, I know. But what is Mr. Hale doing at the Shooting House in the first place? He's supposed to be bunking here."

"It's better for him to be alone." He cinched the saddle and faced her. "Why are you questioning me on this?"

She couldn't tell him that she didn't trust herself around Mr. Hale. Instead, she said, "You know my grandmother would not approve of me visiting a strange man."

"Your grandparents went into town, to help supervise the meetings. We have no choice, and you're holding me up. I need to get into town myself, to get the Jennings brothers to help with repairing the wagon wheel." He had one foot in the stirrup.

Deborah bit her bottom lip. "I can go with you, and we'll drop the food off at the cabin. Give me a minute to saddle my horse."

Isaac swung a leg over and settled into the saddle. He sighed deeply. "All you have to do is leave the food. Don't even speak to him."

She stepped closer, laying a hand on the mare's neck. "Mr. Caper said Mr. Hale killed men ..."

Isaac frowned at her until she stepped back. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let him go without then, if that's what you want. I can spare no more time in arguing."

Contrite, she shook her head. "I'll take the food."

"And give him the message, please."

"I will leave a note." She knew it was childish, but she pouted. "Mr. Hale should be helping you, instead of taking it easy in our cabin. It'll be your fault if you come back and find me dead." She laughed, to take the edge off her words.

"We'll give you a good burial. Now, git. It's almost lunch time." He flashed a smile as he urged his horse forward.



Isaac didn't know the turmoil he was causing, but she'd promised Isaac, and she never broke her promises. Besides, it was a beautiful day for a ride, and she'd concentrate on that.

But the dread lay in the pit of her stomach despite the beauty around her. Plants pushed their way up from the soil and a few flowers already bloomed. Spring was well on its way, but she barely noticed. Icy knots twisted in her stomach, and her breathing quickened as she neared the cabin. A dog barked, startling her, before she realized it was Rascal, running to meet her.

She pulled her horse to a stop and glanced around. Her glance revealed no sign of life, besides the dog. She dismounted, gave Rascal a scratch behind his ears, and pulled the saddlebag down.

If he'd left, just walked away, her turmoil would be over, but she knew that hadn't happened. Rascal would have gone with him. That man was around somewhere. Hopefully, it was not in the cabin.

Her heart tried to beat itself out of her chest when she climbed the two steps to stand on the porch and face the door. She knocked. No one answered.

"Mr. Hale? Are you at home?" She cursed herself for asking that. At home? This wasn't his home. She rapped again, louder, taking her anger out on the door. When there was still no answer, she entered.

Cautiously, she glanced around. It was difficult to tell there had been an occupant last night. The covers were smoothed on the bed, and nothing was out of place, not even a coffee cup, though the aroma of coffee hung in the air.

She shouldn't have lingered, but a surge of nostalgia washed over her. Before the War, they'd gathered here at Christmas and Easter. The cabin was situated on a knoll, to give a view of the lake below, one the Brokkens never tired of, and even now she was drawn to it.

After she unpacked the food, the aroma of the coffee drew her to check the pot, and she discovered there was some left. Perhaps Mr. Hale had gone to explore the area, and perhaps he'd be gone for hours. Maybe she had time for coffee.

She poured herself a cup and carried it to the window, to reminisce of happier times, before the war. Her grandparents, her mother's parents, never came, so it had been just them—the Brokkens—her and her father and her brothers, Karl, Curt, and Fritz. One Christmas, Curt and Fritz had carved crude versions of horses and were pleased at her squeals of delight. Karl had been the one who had an artistic eye. He



had painted her portrait, and the painting still hung in her bedroom, too painful for her to look at, although she had not had the heart to remove it.

She tried to reconcile her memories of her brothers with their stealing the money from the bank, and, what hurt more, leaving her behind, with no knowledge of where they'd gone. She sighed heavily. Something had to be done soon. The bank had remained closed too long. If her family expected to hold onto it, she'd have to get it up and running soon. What family? She was the only Brokken left. Her grandparents were little help, and sad, but true, she wished they'd been the ones to have left. If not for them, her brothers would have moved back to the ranch instead of staying in town. And things would have been much different.

She sighed. As her grandmother always reminded her, if wishes were horses, even beggars would ride. Wishing for a different past was getting her nowhere.

The past was gone, and she had to get on with living. As Paul said in Philippians, *This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before.*

And she had a lot of reaching forth to do. After a day or two more to rest from her journey, she'd go into town and see if she could make heads or tails of the banking business. With the men staying at the ranch, Isaac should soon have it up and running. Her father's furniture could perhaps be sold to purchase more cattle. Things would work out, somehow.

She needed to forgive her brothers; that was the only way to quit re-living the past and would enable her to move on without them. Isaac had told her, more than once, that forgiveness meant giving up all hope of a better past. She knew what he meant by that. The past could not be changed, no matter how much you wished it could be.

She finished her coffee, washed the cup, and placed it on the shelf, ready to make her escape. The backdoor of the cabin opened, and Mr. Hale entered with a string of fish and laid them on the small table next to the door without seeing her. He hung his hat on a peg.

She moved toward the front, hoping to make a quick escape. His head jerked up, and she gave a terse smile, her hand on the door. "I brought some food, although I see you are capable of supplying your own."

"Thank you. I hope you don't mind that I borrowed a pole and went fishing this morning."

"Isaac has decided to let you stay here, so you need to ask him what you can borrow. I obviously don't get a say in the matter." She frowned at him, to erase the image of those strange eyes that looked back at her.

“If you don’t want me here, I’ll leave.”

Her voice took on a haughtier tone. “No, I consider Mr. Isaac a Brokken. He has been here since before I was born and has my complete trust. If he wants you here, he has his reasons, unfathomable to me as they may be. If I did not trust his judgment and had my way, you’d be long gone, not only from here, but from Brokken.” She gasped, and heat rose to her cheeks. Mr. Hale had done nothing to merit her words—nothing but stir up emotions she’d never known existed.

His fingers combed his unruly hair. “As I said, if you want me out, I’ll go.” His chin tilted up a notch and his eyes narrowed, locked with hers. “I know I’m not wanted around here, and believe me, I plan to leave, as soon as I can.”

She turned back to the door and released the wooden bar holding it shut. “Good day, Mr. Hale.”

He cleared his throat. “Thank you again for the food.”

“Mr. Isaac insisted I bring it.” She twisted her head in his direction. “I almost forgot ... Preacher Grisson wanted us to give you a message.” She had the paper in her pocket, but her fumbling fingers were unable to find it.

“Yes?” he said after a few minutes.

She quit looking for the message and straightened. “Miss Waldruff declines your proposal.”

His hand slammed on the table, and her heart constricted when she saw the forlorn look on his face. Her conscience smote her and kept her rooted to the spot.

He turned toward the stove. “*Have faith*. Where does that get you?” he asked bitterly as he shook the coffeepot, now empty. He set it down.

Deborah latched the door back. “I’m sorry. I drank your last cup. Let me make a fresh pot for you.”

He waved a hand as if to tell her he didn’t care. “I’ll go clean these.” He jerked up the string of fish and went out.

She hesitated and then walked to the wood stove. As she made the coffee, she considered his words. Was it Isaac who had told him to have faith? If so, why?

Mr. Chance Hale was an enigma. Mr. Caper said he’d murdered someone, but wasn’t that what war was all about? Men killing men? When did killing cross the line into murder?

She glanced out the window and watched as he cleaned the fish, his head bent to the task. He certainly didn’t look like a murderer, although what did a murderer look like? Something had happened to him, of that she was sure. And since she did not know his story, she had no business to judge him. Her emotions were clouding her reason.

All she knew of Mr. Hale was that he stirred something within her that she'd never felt before. Even now, shivers ran the entire length of her spine as she watched him do the simple task of cleaning fish.

Coffee made, she moved away from the window, set a clean cup on the table for him, and slipped out the front door.



Miss Brokken's words hurt him more than Chance wanted to admit. He probably should leave on foot and find the next town. If he had a hunting rifle, maybe he would have. Instead, he spent a miserable night and slept late the next morning. Even when he woke, he stared at the ceiling, too drained to move until Rascal's barking got him out of bed. He peered out the side window and found he had company coming. He dressed quickly and went to answer the knock.

Klint, Mr. Isaac, and Miss Brokken waited on the porch. They'd brought more food. Miss Brokken and Mr. Isaac, probably noting his disheveled appearance, strolled down to the lake, saying they'd eaten a late breakfast.

Chance left Klint to wash up and to rake wet fingers through his hair. Klint had set the table when he returned.

"You're joining me?" Chance asked.

"Yes, and I'm starving." He sat down with Chance and piled his plate full.

Chance leaned back. Why had they brought food after Miss Brokken told him she wanted him out?

Klint indicated Chance's plate with a wave of his fork. "You planning on eating?"

The aroma from the stew made his stomach growl. He nodded and fixed his plate.

"I made coffee. Let me grab us a cup." Klint jumped to his feet and returned with the pot. "You about ready to return to civilization?" he asked as he poured the coffee.

"Civilization? What does that mean?" Suddenly, he didn't feel like eating and pushed his plate away and focused on his coffee instead.

Klint returned to his seat. "I mean the ranch, the bunkhouse." He paused, indicating Chance's plate again. "You're missing some fine eating. Miss Brokken knows how to cook."

"I'm not hungry. And to answer your question, Miss Brokken does not want me to return to civilization, not on her ranch. I reckon I'll be leaving." He stared into his cup. He'd leave when he got up enough energy, and he'd better find it soon. His mother had often told her sons if a man didn't work, he didn't eat. He'd mooched off these folks long enough.

Klint raised an eyebrow. "I think you're mistaken about Miss Brokken. She's the one who wanted to bring this spread to you, who was up at dawn cooking."

“Not for me?” He frowned. “For everyone, surely.”

“No. The men have returned to town again. That Preacher Grisson wanted to question them and let them spend more time with the ladies. It looks like not everyone was happy after the first introductions.”

Chance narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “If they’ve gone to town, what are you doing here?”

“Do you have to rub it in? The lovely Miss Lavendar Lilley has rejected me.”

Chance snorted. “I find that hard to believe.”

Klint shrugged. “What can I say? It seems I do not meet her criteria of being a cat lover. She took me to her house and perhaps I complained too much of the cat hair.”

Klint probably secretly loved cats but wanted to be free of Miss Lilley. Klint’s sights were set solely on Miss Brokken.

Chance took a sip of coffee and casually asked, “What now? Do you plan to stay?”

Klint grinned. “Yes, as a matter of fact. Miss Brokken has offered me a position at the bank. I’ve had some experience.”

*Probably with embezzlement.* Chance pulled his plate back to him and ate a few bites. After he finished off his buttermilk pie, he gave a tilt of his head. “I guess you heard of my rejection. Miss Waldruff refused to even meet me.”

“I thought it was you who had no interest in Miss Waldruff? You said your brother corresponded with her without your permission.”

“That’s true, but when I read her letters, I felt a bit of hope.” He shrugged his shoulders, as if it no longer mattered.

“I’m sure Preacher Grisson had a hand in that. I know he questioned the men about you and probably told Miss Waldruff without softening any of the details. You could explain to her. I’m sure most of what was said were exaggerations.”

Chance looked into the depth of his coffee as if it held answers. He shrugged. “Maybe they were not.”

“Anyway, if you’re ready to join us at the bunkhouse, it would also suit Mr. Isaac, I’m sure.”

“I don’t know. Those other men fear me, don’t want me around. I saw it in their eyes.”

Klint snorted. “That wasn’t fear you saw. That was admiration. Heck, even the Rebs admire your shooting skills. Half those men are in awe of you.”

Chance didn’t believe him. His temples throbbed, and he was ready to be rid of Klint. “So, is that why you came today? To talk me into going to the bunkhouse? Not just to eat all the food?”

Klint grinned and picked up the pot. “Want another cup?”

“Sure.” Chance set the cup in front of him. “I’ll speak to Mr. Isaac. I’d be less of a burden at the bunkhouse, but I plan to leave Brokken, as soon as I get enough money for a train ticket.”

“Is that what you want?”

Chance pressed his lips together. “It doesn’t matter what I want. Never has.” He lifted his cup.

Klint caught his arm just as Chance brought it to his lips, causing him to spill a few drops. Chance’s glare did not seem to make an impression on the irritating man.

Instead, Klint tightened his grasp. “Quit feeling sorry for yourself. If you want something, go after it. Quit making excuses.”

Chance jerked his arm away, spilling more coffee. “So, you’re asking me to compete with you for the affections of Miss Brokken?”

“What?” Klint’s mouth gaped open. He stroked his chin and shook his head, throwing Chance a sly look. “Nope. I wouldn’t go that far. However, if you truly wish to meet with Miss Waldruff, perhaps I can talk to her for you.”

“Act as a proxy for me? I bet she’d love that, a man who can’t even plead his own case.” Chance laughed harshly.

“If you’d rather speak to her, do so.”

The urge to punch Klint’s smiling face was almost impossible to resist.

Chance shook his head. “It won’t do any good. Why bother?”

“You were a Sharpshooter, one of the best, if not the best. It helped to end the war. Miss Waldruff may well understand.”

“Perhaps she’d understand that part ... but there’s more.” Chance wrapped his fingers around his coffee cup. “I shot my brother. He was a gunner for the Confederacy.” He braced as if for a blow.

When he threw Klint a sideways glance, he saw the man’s eyes were compassionate. Klint leaned toward him. “You made a mistake. Men in uniform look much alike.”

“Yes, but I went crazy after that.” He rubbed his face. “I wanted to die and did foolish things, tried to get my own self shot, to end my misery.”

Klint shook his head, his brows drawn down. “That was the past. Forgive yourself instead of pitying yourself.”

“You think I pity myself?”

Klint shrugged.

Chance’s anger boiled over. “I’m not pitying myself. I pity my brother for dying so young, his wife and child, for losing him, our family... they had to live with what I had done.”

“Lots of people lost family in the War.”

Chance ignored him. “And it’s not just my brother. I took the lives of men who never had a chance to defend themselves. Shot them

down in cold blood. I should have quit, after killing my brother, but I kept shooting that damn rifle.”

Klint laid a hand on his arm. “Mistakes were made, by many people. If we kept count of all our mistakes, we’d be living in misery the rest of our lives.”

Chance propped his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands. He would not break down in front of Klint. With Mr. Isaac, that had been different. But Klint? Who’d probably marry Deborah Brokken? Who got everything his heart desired? Chance took a shaky breath and steeled himself. He raised his head to glare at Klint. “You have no idea what it’s like.”

“I might have a vague idea.” His face was composed as he leaned closer. “You see, I was a sharpshooter, too. For the Confederacy.” He chuckled. “No one’s heard of me. We were a ragtag group, not like the elite Sharpshooters of the Union.”

Chance’s jaw fell slack. “You?”

“Why are you so surprised? You don’t think I can shimmy up a tree?” His laughter filled the room, and his blue eyes flashed.



DEBORAH AND ISAAC CAME up on the porch and heard the laughter from within. She raised an eyebrow. “Is that Mr. Hale laughing?”

Isaac smiled. “More likely Mr. Caper.”

“Should we knock?”

“I believe that would be the polite thing to do.”

Mr. Caper opened the door and beckoned them in. Perhaps Mr. Hale had not been laughing, but his face was composed when he stood.

“If you gentlemen have finished eating, I’ll clean up the kitchen,” she said.

“Before you do that, if you have a moment, I’d like to talk to you and Mr. Isaac.” He shot a glance at Mr. Caper and motioned toward the door.

Mr. Caper took the hint. “I’ll take a stroll if my presence is not needed.” He left.

Deborah waited for Mr. Hale to speak. He did not do so until they were all seated around the table.

“Klint and I have been talking. It made me realize that I’m getting preferential treatment.”

Deborah tilted her head. “What? You mean by staying here? Do you want to move into the bunkhouse?”

“If you agree?” His eyes were on her, and her cheeks grew warm.

She nodded. “Of course, I agree.” She longed to reach across the table to touch his arm. “I’m sorry for my words yesterday.”



Isaac raised an eyebrow at her. She had not told him what had happened.

Mr. Hale visibly relaxed and cleared his throat. "There are jobs around the ranch I will do to pay off my debt."

"Debt?" Mr. Isaac said.

Mr. Hale linked his fingers together. "The use of this cabin."

Isaac gave Mr. Hale a soft smile. "You've only stayed two nights."

Deborah nodded in agreement. "There is no need to pay us back. This cabin was empty, and you were more than welcome to use it."

Mr. Hale shook his head. "No, I will pay for my stay." A warm smile spread to his eyes and released butterflies in Deborah's stomach. He seemed have forgotten Isaac's presence. His gaze remained on her.

She stood and grabbed a plate. "These dishes won't wash themselves."



Mr. Hale stood to help, but Isaac shook his head. “I’ll help Miss Deborah. It might do you some good to spend time with your friend.” He nodded toward the door.

Mr. Hale did not argue but grabbed his hat and left.

Deborah gave a short laugh while she filled the dishpan from the bucket at the backdoor. “His friend? When did those two become friends?”

“They seemed perfectly at ease with each other when we entered, friends, I would say. Perhaps jealousy between them caused friction earlier,” Isaac said, a smile playing on his lips.

“Jealousy?” Her cheeks heated under his scrutiny and she busied herself with scraping the plates and dishes. The men had left little food. “Why would they be jealous of each other?”

“If I’m not mistaken, they both seem smitten with you.” He laughed and stacked the scraped-out dishes by the dishpan.

“Nonsense.” Heat rose to her cheeks, and she knew it betrayed her. “Well, maybe Mr. Caper is. I’m not sure. He’s the type who flirts with all the ladies.” They both laughed and worked in silence for a few minutes.

When Deborah scrubbed the last plate clean and handed it to Isaac to rinse, he touched her arm. “Normally I would consider this none of my business. However, Mr. Hale spoke to me of things that happened in the War, things you need to know before you consider courting him.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “I’m not going to court Mr. Hale, I assure you.”

“May I ask why?”

She frowned at him and gave him the washrag to wipe down the table. “First, you know my grandmother would never allow it ...”

“And when has that ever stopped you?” Isaac laughed and handed her back the washrag.

She rinsed it and laid it out to dry. “The main reason I would not consider it is because Mr. Caper said Mr. Hale murdered people. I think that’s what he said—murdered, not killed. Although I’m not sure what the difference is.”

Isaac nodded solemnly.

She went to the backdoor and threw out the dirty wash water. She wiped out the dishpan and turned it upside down before she faced him. “Why do you think Mr. Caper told me Mr. Hale was a murderer?”

“Caper, more than likely, wishes to court you. Maybe he’s trying to rid himself of competition. Or, who knows? Maybe he’s the type to spread gossip.” He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Deborah nodded. “If he’s a gossip, that means he’s a liar?”

“I didn’t say he was a liar. Gossip often has a kernel of truth.”

She considered that, turning it over in her mind. “If he’s not lying, Mr. Hale is a murderer. Murderer or not, he is strange, not like the others. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, I do. That does not make him a bad man.”

“So, what are you saying? You think I should encourage this man?”

He patted her shoulder. “No. Don’t encourage him until you learn the truth. Sit down and talk with him.”

“Why? I said I had no interest ...” She dropped her gaze to her hands. She’d never lied to Isaac. She would not do so now. “The truth is that he attracts me, more than any other man I’ve ever met. I thought it best to stay away from him. Besides, he has no interest in me.”

Isaac laughed. “The man is smitten with you. I knew that from the moment I met him.”

She gave a snort. “He rarely opens his mouth when I’m around.”

Isaac canted a glance at her. “Did you forget he talked to us a few minutes ago?”

“Because he had something to say.” She shook her head.

“Maybe he has something to say about the War. Ask him. It’s that simple.”

Her fingers intertwined and twisted, but she’d already decided she’d do it. But she knew it would not be simple.



KLINT CHOSE TO STAY behind to walk to the bunkhouse with Chance. Miss Brokken and Mr. Isaac took the leftovers and headed back. It took only a few minutes for Chance to gather his things, whistle for Rascal, and they were on their way. He’d grown used to Klint’s constant chatter and enjoyed listening to him tell of his exploits in the War.

When they arrived at the bunkhouse, Klint left without saying where he was going. Chance stored his gear away, fed Rascal, and washed up. The men still had not returned from town. The courting business lasted a long time.

Chance sat on his bunk and wondered if he should start work on his own or wait. Thankfully, Mr. Isaac came to the door and motioned for him. Chance told Rascal to stay and followed Mr. Isaac.

But instead of heading toward the field, Mr. Isaac walked toward the main house. He did not offer an explanation.

Chance, his gut queasy, put out a hand to detain him. "Where are we going, Mr. Isaac?"

"To the Brokken House. Miss Deborah wishes to speak to you."

"To me?"

Mr. Isaac squinted at him. "I'm a bit nearsighted, but I think I grabbed the right man."

Chance did not laugh. "Are her grandparents there?"

Mr. Isaac smiled. "Luckily, they are not. They are visiting with neighbors. Miss Deborah pleaded a headache to get out of the commitment."

"Oh." He frowned. Why would she wish to speak to him? Had she changed her mind again and planned to kick him out before he even settled in? He tried to sort through the emotions surging through him, but didn't know whether he was more excited or nervous.

The house was different than any he'd seen before, the wood dark and ornate on the outside. Inside, the rooms were brighter, the large windows catching the light.

They paused in the foyer, and Mr. Isaac indicated a coat tree for him to hang his hat on. Chance ran his fingers through his hair nervously and followed Mr. Isaac into the sitting room.

Miss Brokken rose to greet them. She'd changed into a dress of turquoise that perfectly matched her eyes. His heart quickened in response to her soft smile.

Mr. Isaac left them, although Chance suspected he had not gone far.

Miss Brokken indicated the round table beside her that held a porcelain tea service. "Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. Hale?"

He didn't, really, but he nodded and took a seat across from her when she sat down.

If she was nervous, she did not show it as she presided over pouring the tea. "Mr. Isaac suggested this meeting." She paused as if waiting for him to speak.

When he didn't, she continued. "I wondered if you could tell me about the War." A soft pink stained her cheeks.

"What do you want to know?" He took a sip of the tea, feeling disoriented, as if in some outlandish book, like *Alice, in Wonderland*.

"I want to know about your experiences in the War." She took a sip of tea and again waited for him to speak.

Had someone told her, as they had Miss Waldruff of the things he had done? He frowned. "Has Preacher Grisson been speaking to you?"

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. "No, not lately. Why?"

He set his cup and saucer on the table. "Preacher Grisson told Miss Waldruff ... things about me. I thought he might have talked to you, also." He shrugged.

Her breathing deepened, and she raised an eyebrow. “What is it you don’t Preacher Grisson telling people?”

“Some things are best left unsaid.” His tone was angry, and she drew back as if he had struck her. Her reaction unsettled him. “I’m sorry. I’m confused as to why you would want this information.”

She avoided his eyes for a second. “I ... This is difficult to discuss. I need to make some decisions, and I need to understand you better... so I can make.. my decision.”

“Miss Brokken, do you want me to leave Brokken Arrow? Is that what you are trying to decide?”

She glanced down at the teacup in her hands and then up to him, her eyes shimmering. “No, Mr. Hale. I’m trying to decide if I want you to stay.”



Deborah's cheeks felt as if they'd burst into flames at any second.

She lowered her gaze to the teacup again and waited for him to speak.

"You're trying to decide if you want me to stay? In what capacity? As a ranch hand?"

She peered up to see his forehead was a mass of furrows. She'd hoped he'd understand her intentions a little faster.

She placed the cup on the table beside her. "Not exactly. I like you, Mr. Hale. I want to get to know you better."

His frown deepened. He shook his head. "My plans are to repay you for your hospitality, and I hoped perhaps I could get hired on as a ranch hand, just long enough to make enough money for a train ticket. You do not want to get to know me better."

She tilted her head. "Are you used to making decisions for people?"

His throat was dry, and he picked his cup up to drain it of the tea. "Yes, unfortunately, I *am* used to making decisions for others. You want to know what I did in the War? I *decided* who lived or died. I didn't give them much choice at all in the matter." His angry eyes shot shards of glass into her heart.

She put her hand to her chest to ease the pain. "But I'm confused. Isn't that what war is about? Men shooting other men?"

He passed a hand over his face and rested his elbows on his knees. "There are different ways to wage war. One way is to give the other side a fair chance. War should not be about killing your enemy but *defeating* your enemy, forcing them to surrender, not utterly destroying them. And, yes, men are killed, but that's not the purpose of war." He fell silent.

She puzzled over his words. "Mr. Hale, I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

He twisted his head to look at her and then straightened and leaned back in the chair. "I was a Union Sharpshooter and picked men off one by one, destroying them. And not just them, but their families."

A numbness enveloped her, but she was able to nod and say softly, "I see."

He spoke softly. "So, what now?"

Tears welled in her eyes, and she blinked them away. "I need time to think about this."

He didn't move, seeming to have fortified himself. "I want to be



sure I fully understand our conversation, also. Are you telling me that I have hope of winning your affection? And that is why you are questioning me?"

"Yes, Mr. Hale. We have so many obstacles in our way, but yes, I'm asking you, well, I know you were not interested in marrying, but I ... I hoped ..."

"Perhaps I can be persuaded to marry." He smiled his elusive smile that warmed her soul, but then his face fell. "That is if you can live with the fact that I was a Sharpshooter. But there's still something else you need to know."

An icy claw closed over her heart. "Yes?"

His breathing deepened, and he pressed his fingers to his temples as if his head ached but did not speak.

"Please tell me, Mr. Hale."

"My brother was a Confederate gunner. I shot him." He shrugged his shoulders.

"You accidentally shot your brother?"

His eyes became glazed. "No, it wasn't an accident. I raised my rifle and aimed it at his head—"

"Chance! Please!" Tears streamed down her face although she wasn't sure when she'd started crying. She fumbled for her handkerchief.

He looked at her with dull eyes. "I didn't know he was my brother when I pulled the trigger, but it was no accident that I killed him." As if his legs had forgotten how to work, he struggled to his feet.

"How do you endure it?" she whispered.

"Not very well at all." The sense of loss, deep in his eyes, constricted her heart.

She stood and moved to him, to touch the back of her hand against his cheek. The desire to pull him into her arms, to offer him comfort, grew. With an effort, she stepped back. "I'm sorry I forced you to speak of such a painful subject."

"You needed to know ... in order to make your decision." His fingertips touched hers, sending a tingling up her arms. "Goodnight, Miss Brokken."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he was gone. The steps upstairs seemed insurmountable, but she made it to her room and fell across her bed and sobbed.



CHANCE LAY IN HIS BUNK and stared at the ceiling. The whirlwind of emotions had yet to die down. That Deborah had feelings for him, might be willing to marry him lifted his heart, and then the memory of shooting Paul drove it back into the deepest pit.

And guilt for what had he had put Deborah through. The tears streaming down her face rent his heart. When she recovered her senses, her decision would be clear—she'd never see or speak to him again.

He sighed so deeply someone whispered harshly to quiet down.

Mr. Isaac had told him no sin was unforgivable. He thought of Klint. The Confederate sharpshooters had never been an organized regiment. Klint had not made as many kills as he had, not nearly as many, but he had killed men in the same way. Somehow, Klint had forgiven himself.

Perhaps if one of the men had not been his brother Paul, it would have been easier for him. But when all was said and done, what difference did it make if it was Paul or some other man? Everyone he shot had family who mourned them. Killing Paul had exposed that truth.

Perhaps the hardest part to forgive was that he could have stopped the killing when he realized how wrong it was. But he didn't; instead, he increased his kills. He had longed for, prayed for death, somehow, someway, but he had not died. Exposing himself to more and more danger did not destroy him but elevated him to the status of hero.

Some comfort could be gained by telling himself it was all part of the war effort. The comfort was almost meaningless. The scars he carried would never be alleviated. And if he married...*Deborah*, he whispered aloud...wouldn't she be asked to carry the same scars, share in the same pain? And if they were blessed with children, when he told them, and he would tell them, no matter how painful to them or to him, what would be their reaction?

Perhaps, he should walk away to spare others the pain. God help him, he didn't know if he possessed enough strength or sense.

He sighed deeply again. Deborah would not choose to join her life with his. What woman in her right mind would do so? No, he would walk alone the rest of his life.

Sleep finally came in the wee hours of the morning, and his dream was familiar, pleasant, the same dream as the night he spent on the train, a dream of Deborah.



Deborah cried herself to sleep. Even her grandparents, who usually noticed nothing out of the ordinary, remarked upon her appearance at breakfast. She explained it away by saying she was coming down with a cold. She walked into Brokken, stopping at the knoll that overlooked the town. She lingered for thirty minutes, hoping the cougar she'd seen before might make an appearance. That day, for a cougar to come so close, to watch her, and to slip silently away seemed almost a sign from God, one she had needed at the time. But today, the cougar made no appearance.

Would she have taken it as a sign if it had? Would it have helped her to decide?

She stopped in at the bank, although she had no energy to pour through books filled with numbers.

Klint was there and looked up from the account book in front of him and smiled. "Miss Brokken! Good morning."

His forehead furrowed, and he immediately moved around the counter to come stand beside her. "Are you feeling unwell?"

She ignored his question but forced herself to indicate the work he'd been doing. "Are you making headway?"

"Some. Leave it in my hands, and I'll have the bank open in a couple of days."

He stood too close, and she stepped away. "I know I said I'll help today... but I do feel unwell."

His eyes filled with warmth as he regarded her. Why did she prefer Chance Hale over him? Her heart made no sense to her head.

She took a moment to wind the cuckoo clock. "As a matter of fact, I am going to see the doctor."

"It's good to know Brokken has a doctor."

"To tell the truth, the doctor was killed in the War, and his wife took over his practice. She's quite capable," she said to the surprised look on his face.

He inclined his head. "I'm sure she is, as are all the ladies of Brokken."

His words made her blush for an unknown reason. When he moved toward her again, she backed away. "I'll be by later, when I feel better."

She hurried out the door and continued down Main Street. More people were out than usual, and it took her a moment to realize the potential grooms were making repairs on storefronts. She'd forgotten

them in her distress.

To her friends, she nodded in greeting, but did not linger to speak, even when she passed Wanda Waldruff. She was glad when she reached the old brothel where Miss Abby practiced medicine.

Abby greeted her and stepped back to survey her. "Are you ill?"

Deborah loosened the bonnet strings and flung her bonnet down on the teak bar top. "Folks keep asking me that. I suppose I must look a mess."

Miss Abby led her to the kitchen. "Lucky for you, I just made scones. A couple of those and a hot cup of coffee will do wonders for what ails you."

Deborah sank into a chair, and Miss Abby set the scones on the table. "There's nothing better than fresh butter and orange marmalade on a scone. Please, help yourself."

To Deborah's consternation, her tears burst loose. Miss Abby draped an arm over her shoulders, and Deborah turned to face her friend, lifting her tear-stained face. Miss Abby stroked her hair and pulled her close.

She smelled of lavender, and after a moment, Deborah gained control of herself. She pulled away and found her handkerchief.

Miss Abby took a seat across from her. "I remember Vic said your brothers left you a jar of orange marmalade. That must have set you off."

Deborah traced a pattern on the tablecloth listlessly and didn't reply.

"Is there something you want to talk about?"

She bit her lip. How could Miss Abby help her with this. Before she could form an answer, the backdoor opened and Sheriff Vic came in.

"Thought I smelled fresh scones. Thanks, Abby."

"Who said I made them for you? And for heaven's sake, don't take them all. I have company, if you didn't notice."

"Good morning, Deborah. You look like something the cat drug in that the kittens wouldn't have."

Abby shot her friend a frigid look. "Vic! My goodness. Don't you see something is troubling her?"

The sheriff took a seat at the table. "Yes, and I can guess what. Man trouble. If you want my advice, Deb, stay away from all men."

Miss Abby frowned. "Do not listen to her. Not all men are scumbags."

She slathered a scone with butter. "Maybe not, but they all bring heartache, in one form or another."

Abby's red face indicated anger. "Vic! Maybe you need to go."

Deborah held up a hand. Their banter had lifted her spirits, and she attempted a smile. "No, that's all right. I agree with the sheriff.

Love brings its share of heartaches.”

Miss Abby blinked as if tears were in her eyes. “Yes, but great joy... if you find the right one.”

Deborah’s lip trembled. “What if you find the right one, but it doesn’t work out?”

Sheriff Vic laughed. “Klint Caper flashes those big blue eyes of his, and you fall under his spell. Then along comes Chance Hale, and he’s hiding something. A little mystery in a man is always intriguing to a woman.”

Abby smiled. “That’s true enough.”

Sheriff Vic took a bite of her scone slathered with butter. “I was suspicious of Hale from the start,” she said to Abby. “He kept his hat pulled down low, as if he didn’t want to be recognized

Miss Abby prepared Deborah’s scone, as if she was a child. In the older woman’s company, she had begun to relax, although she’d twisted her handkerchief into knots.

Abby remained by her until she’d poured Deborah a cup of coffee and urged her to eat. Deborah took a bite and found the scone delicious. After Abby rubbed her palm over her back, she took a seat next to her.

As Deborah continued eating, Sheriff Vic gave a nod of approval, at her appetite, Deborah assumed. “I did some checking the past couple of days since we got home. I found out some information about Chance Hale.”

Had it only been days since they’d returned? It seemed an eternity for Deborah. She nodded. “He told me.”

The sheriff motioned at Deborah, her third scone in her hand, if Deborah had counted right. “Do you want to tell Abby or should I?”

Deborah waved her permission. She was sure she couldn’t get the words out without tears.

“Chance Hale is a war hero. He saved countless lives, getting the Union troops out of dangerous positions. And you know, you could say he saved Confederate lives if you consider that because of him and others like him, the War ended. It could have dragged on for many more months, if not years.” She took a swig of coffee before continuing. “He served under Colonel Berdan’s command as an elite Sharpshooter, and from what I understand, is highly decorated.”

Deborah’s eyes widened in surprise at this version of Chance.

Abby frowned in her direction and cleared her throat. “I don’t understand. Is Mr. Hale the one who has you in this state, Deborah?”

The sheriff laughed and answered for her. “Coming home, on the train, you should have seen them. As soon as they set eyes on each other, they were infatuated, as if Cupid shot an arrow into their hearts. But somehow, the arrow has broken. Am I right, Deb?”

Abby's gaze traveled from the sheriff to Deborah, still frowning her puzzlement. "You mean she formed an attachment to Mr. Hale that quickly? And then he has broken her heart? In less than a week?"

Deborah's cheeks burned, and the tablecloth again became the object of her attention.

The spoon clinked against the sheriff's cup as she stirred in sugar, a pleasing sound. "You remember how it was with Jonathan and me. A lot can happen in a week."

At the sheriff's words, Deborah raised her head and found her voice. "Are you saying you were not happy with Sheriff English?"

Sheriff Vic studied the coffee in her cup. "Jonathan and I met and were married within a month. Turns out, he wasn't what I expected."

Deborah had never known, had always thought their marriage a happy one. She bit her bottom lip and contemplated the sheriff's words.

Miss Abby shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I still do not understand. If you like him, and he has such an excellent background, why are you so upset, Deb?"

Deborah fortified herself with a gulp of coffee. "The sheriff is right. I was attracted to Chance, Mr. Hale, from the moment I met him. Isaac saw that and urged me to talk to him since Chance had told him some of what happened in the War ... but it was a different version than that given by Sheriff Vic. Isaac thought I needed to know, before I ... well, behaved foolishly."

She traced a pattern on the tablecloth again. Thankfully, the ladies didn't rush her but waited patiently for her to continue.

Not looking up, she braced herself and spoke quickly. "Something terrible happened to him. His brother was a Confederate gunner, and Chance shot him." She firmed her lips to stop their quivering. When she glanced up, even Sheriff Vic's eyes held tears.

Abby stroked her arm. "Poor man! What can we do to help?"

Deborah smiled at her offer but shook her head sadly. "It's up to Chance. Until he forgives himself, there can be no future for us. I've considered the things he told me and can accept them, but he has to heal. I am too broken myself to help him."

Miss Abby shook her arm. "Deborah, every resident of this town, except the newcomers, know how the name of Brokken came about."

Embarrassment heated her cheeks. Her great grandfather would be ashamed of her. Wilhelm Brecheisen came to America from Germany and promptly got into a fight with another man, coming out on the losing end with a broken hip. So many called him Broken that the name stuck. However, her grandfather changed it a bit when he added the "K" in the middle. The K, he told his family, stood for *kein*, "not" in German. He declared he was not broken and never would be.

Had Deborah inherited any of her great grandfather's strength and resiliency? Perhaps she needed time and patience with herself. The turmoil with Chance had taken a toll.

"So, help us to understand. Are you willing to allow Mr. Hale to court you?" Abby leaned back in her chair.

"I don't know. His pain is too great." A tear slid down her cheek.

"What does your heart say?" Abby asked.

Deborah blushed. "I want to get to know him better."

Abby smiled. "You can do that, slowly, and maybe we can help him in some way, or help you to help him."

Deborah's heart lifted, and she smiled and nodded.

The sheriff frowned. "To tell the truth, if you two plan on courting, I'm not comfortable with Mr. Hale living at the ranch, not if he is upsetting you so. We must remedy that situation."

Deborah gasped. "Make him move? I won't agree to that."

Sheriff Vic grinned and lowered a hand, palm down, to calm her.

"No, not him. You. Move into town, into your brothers' house... well, it's your house now."

"Leave my grandparents?" She snorted. "They'd never allow me to live alone in town."

Abby refilled her cup without Deborah asking. Her appetite returned, and she reached for another scone.

Sheriff Vic grinned at her. "If you think you can bear having me around, I could move in with you." Her eyes searched Deborah's, questioning.

Sheriff Vic gave her strength, just what Deborah needed. And, as an added benefit, she'd be closer to Abby, almost like the mother she'd never had. She blinked away the forming tears. "I would love that."

"I wouldn't be so sure you want to have her around," Abby said. She slapped her friend's hand away from reaching for another scone. "She's bound to eat all your food."

Deborah laughed. "Living in town might be best, anyway. I hired Mr. Caper to help out at the bank, and I need to keep an eye on him."

Abby nodded. "That's what you can tell your grandparents. They'd be sure to understand that. I'll go with you, to speak to them, if you think it would help."

Deborah nodded. "I'm sure it would. Thank you."

The sheriff leaned toward her. "Let me give you another piece of advice. Hire more employees, a lady or two, at the bank. Do not work with Mr. Caper alone."

"Why? Did you discover something in his background?"

Sheriff Vic smiled. "No, but he's quite the ladies' man. I wouldn't trust that man as far as I could throw him."

Deborah laughed. "I have hope that he's more trustworthy with



money. I gave him a key to the bank.”

“I’m sure he’s fine in that department. Did you know he was a sharpshooter also? On the Confederate side.”

Deborah shook her head. “He hasn’t mentioned it.” Perhaps that’s why Klint and Chance had drawn closer.

Sheriff Vic pushed back her chair. “Well, there’s no time like the present.”

Deborah blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“If Abby does not have other plans, we’ll go to the ranch, pack you up, and get you settled in by tonight. The house is fully furnished. You only need to pack your clothes. And while you two take care of that and talk to Deborah’s grandparents, I’ll pay a visit to Mr. Hale.”

Emotions threatened to drown Deborah. All of this was happening too fast. “What will you say?” Deborah could not bear hurting Chance again.

“I will tell him he may visit tomorrow evening, if that suits you? However, I will make it clear it will be under my supervision.”

Deborah breathed a sigh of relief. “That will suit me fine.” Her heart pierced with such joy, tears came to her eyes.

Abby touched her arm. “Deborah, what’s wrong now?”

But it was Sheriff Vic who answered with a laugh. “I think Cupid shot another arrow. Maybe this one won’t break.”



Chance borrowed a horse from Mr. Isaac, and they rode out to check the cattle. Although the herd was small, the potential was there. They discussed which cows to cull to strengthen the bloodline. Mr. Isaac understood cattle better than Chance did, and he listened attentively to the older man's words.

A cloud of dust from the south indicated another rider's approach. Worry lines appeared across Mr. Isaac's forehead. "Ride out and meet whoever that is," he told Chance.

He needed no urging. Fear something had happened to Deborah propelled him into the saddle and on his way, almost before Mr. Isaac had finished speaking.

It was the sheriff, reinforcing Chance's fear. But the planes of her face were smooth, calming him. Chance greeted her and waited for her to speak.

Her first words surprised him. "Take off your hat."

Puzzled, he did as he was told. She continued surveying him. He blinked. "Did you want me to take a message to Mr. Isaac?"

"No, it's you I wish to speak to." She adjusted her seating and looked into the distance. "I've spoken to Deborah this morning, and some decisions have been made."

His heart sank. This was Preacher Grisson's daughter. He'd convinced her, just as he had Wanda, that his actions in the war were unforgivable. He didn't answer but twisted his hat around and around and waited for her to continue.

"Deborah owns a house in Brokken, and she's moving there as we speak."

Tears burned the back of his eyes. She wanted to get as far away from him as possible and who could blame her? He nodded his defeat. "I'll pack and leave. There's no need for Miss Brokken to move away, to get farther away from me. I'm the one who needs to go."

The sheriff snorted. "No, you foolish man. Deborah is moving to the house in Brokken at my suggestion. I'm moving in with her for a while and will supervise the courting."

"The courting? With me?" If they'd not been sitting on their horses, he might have hugged the woman.

The sheriff laughed. "Be at the Brokken house in town at precisely eight tomorrow night. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." She reined her horse, as if to ride away.

He stretched out an arm to stop her. "Just one question."

“What?” she asked, impatience in her voice.

“Why did you want me to remove my hat?”

The muscles in her face twitched, as if she struggled for words. She finally spoke. “You need to let the world see who you are, a War hero, not someone who needs to hide.” She chuckled. “Put it back on now. The sun gets pretty hot in Texas, even in March.”

As he rode back toward Mr. Isaac, forgetting to bid her good day, she sniggered and called after him. “And your eyes are too pretty to keep hidden.”



KLINT HAD NOT BEEN happy to hear Chance would be visiting Deborah but had finally accepted it and more—he let Chance borrow his best suit. Mr. Isaac told him to take the buggy instead of walking.

The Brokken house in town was even more impressive than the one on the ranch. He stood on the porch and hesitated. Was this the right thing or would it only lead to more heartache?

But he couldn’t leave now when he’d found himself here, a poor farm boy from Missouri, about to knock on the door of the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

The door swung open and Deborah smiled, lighting his insides with fire. “Aren’t you going to come in, Mr. Hale?”

She reached out her hand, and he gladly allowed himself to be pulled through the doorway. When their fingers intertwined, she moved closer, and her soft lips yielded to his.

“Deborah Brokken!” Sheriff Vic’s voice rang out. She sighed heavily. “This is going to be more difficult than I thought.”

Even with the sheriff glaring at him, it took a moment for Chance to release Deborah. Their fingers remained intertwined, and the way Deborah gripped him, Chance knew she was never letting go.



*THIS IS THE THIRD BOOK of the Brokken Road Romances. Thanks so much for reading.*

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# About the Author

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**A***bagail Eldan is the pen name of Sheila Hollinghead. She lives in South Alabama with her husband, five dogs and two cats, near where her ancestors scratched a living from the ground. You can connect with Sheila at the following links:*

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